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Judith Sloan

OPINION | 1 of 6

## Crimes cloaked in euphemisms

CHRIS GODDARD AND NEEROSH MUDALY [The Australian](#) August 25, 2011 12:00AM

**CHILD abuse creates the darkest of shadows. The shadows enveloping the brief life of Felicia (The Weekend Australian, August 20) are perhaps the blackest imaginable.**

According to Michael McKenna and Rory Callinan's reports Felicia, aged just 15, had been repeatedly sexually assaulted but not protected. In an extraordinary, almost unbelievable sequence of events, she was briefly removed from home but then returned to be assaulted again. Even after being admitted to hospital with marks around her neck, she was not protected from the crimes.

It is reported that in desperation, as she was about to be assaulted again, she secretly used her mobile phone to record the crime. Imagine being so desperate to be believed that you record yourself being assaulted and are prepared to allow others to hear the resultant degradation.

Even then, after what must have been the most humiliating of experiences, she was not made safe. The shadows must have appeared even blacker. She hanged herself on the veranda a day after her 16th birthday and just weeks after her friend Zoe had killed herself. She left a long suicide letter.



There is a great deal we must learn from Felicia's tragedy, if we have the courage to peer into the darkness. Her brief tortured life reminds us that, for some, being forced to live with abuse is worse than death.

This reflects a large theme from our research with children and young people who had been abused. They spoke of their helplessness, their inability to escape. Some described becoming hostages to the perpetrator, controlled by a terrorist, of having to submit in order to survive.

In spite of what we know of adult survivors of Stockholm syndrome, for example, how difficult it is for them even when free to confront the perpetrators, we fail to acknowledge the pain child victims of abuse suffer. Felicia did what many adults cannot do. She reported the crimes repeatedly. Even then she was not heard.

Crimes against children derail development, black out all hope. Yet many of our responses serve to minimise the seriousness, disguise the offences, and thus undermine the victim. Offenders committing crimes in circumstances similar to Felicia's might be charged with "maintaining a sexual relationship with a child". Yet if the perpetrator repeatedly raped his wife, it would be called rape.

Language that rewrites the crime, hiding the horror, may be a major contributor to the short sentences serious sex offenders receive. Only last month, the Queensland Attorney-General expressed his concern about such minimalist sentencing to the Sentencing Advisory Council.

The law is but one of the serial offenders. Psychiatry and psychology are littered with archeological remains of Greek words. Someone who rapes children may be called a pedophile, originally meaning "a lover of children". Countless hours are wasted, millions of dollars distributed to expert witnesses, while courts debate whether the child rapist is, was, or may temporarily be a pedophile. This from a discipline that, until recently, accused children of lying, fantasising, even being seductive.

The latest word of Greek origin to dominate child protection and minimise the damage done, is

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trauma, as in "children traumatised by abuse". Trauma means wound, injury. Toddlers may suffer injury when they fall over. As Felicia's short life shows, in many cases child abuse destroys childhoods, blows worlds apart. Of course, the meanings of words change. Unfortunately for children all the changes are aimed at reducing the seriousness of the problem. There are words of Greek origin that more accurately describe the destruction caused by child abuse. Catastrophe is one.

Weasel words also overwhelm child protection, where parents' rights to another chance to be a parent repeatedly take precedence over a child's only chance of childhood. The talk is about vulnerable families not vulnerable children. Children are not assaulted but "at risk". Such words corrupt. Try to find the words assault, violence and crime in child protection documents. Perhaps this is why, in Victoria, it was reported by the Ombudsman that children were recorded as having been seen when workers had merely telephoned the parents and why, in the Northern Territory, the Ombudsman reported "dummy" assessments on children.

There is much more to learn from Felicia's terrible death. Her sad story should remind us that not all the child abuse fatalities involve brutal murders of babies and toddlers, as with Dean Shillingsworth in NSW, the recent case of Hayley in Victoria, or Baby Peter in Britain.

Many child abuse deaths occur later in life. Many young people and adults who commit suicide were the victims of abuse as children. These suicides are not limited to women. There are calls for an inquiry into the Catholic Church in Victoria after Robert Best was sentenced to 14 years and nine months' jail for the abuse of 11 boys. At least 25 victims in the Ballarat area are reported to have killed themselves.

Another poignant theme is apparent in the opening paragraph of Felicia's suicide letter: "Dear everyone, I'm sorry it had to be like this. If there is any chance I can be [forgiven] I will much appreciate it." As our research has shown, children take responsibility for everything that happens, blaming themselves for the rapes and violence, for the problems that result. Felicia actually apologised to everyone for the trouble she had caused.

We need to apologise to her. We failed to protect Felicia when she was alive. We must not fail to respect her in death. Felicia's letter shines some light into the appalling darkness. What she wrote, what she suffered, the mistakes that were made, should not be buried with her.

*Chris Goddard and Neerosh Mudaly are authors of The Truth is Longer than a Lie. Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800.*

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## COMMENTS ON THIS STORY

**PaxUs of Brisbane** Posted at 12:28 PM August 25, 2011

Bravo! Someone not afraid to tell it like it is. This is also happening in all areas of violent crime, not just child abuse. This tragic story comes as no surprise in Queensland, where Murderers walk free, violent perpetrators are given slap on the wrist sentences and vast sentence reductions are handed out for pleading guilty. Blame is apportioned to the offender's environment and upbringing and this is used to provide mitigating circumstances that allow weak sentencing and remove responsibility from the offender.

**TheGreatSpaces** Posted at 12:20 PM August 25, 2011

This is so sad. I wonder why rape isn't called rape by the authorities when it comes to children?

Baffling... It probably goes against the principle of double jeopardy and statute of limitations or something, but I wonder if the law could be changed so that anyone who rapes a child, in addition to being sentenced for the rape, also can be prosecuted for murder if that victim later commits suicide. Who knows? Maybe it won't be much of a deterrent...

**Philip Martin of Margate Qld** Posted at 12:08 PM August 25, 2011

It is indeed a tragedy when this occurs and the relevant authorities could prevent continuous abuse and the death of an innocent child. The people, family members responsible should be put in gaol and the social workers should be charged with criminal negligence and removed from their employment.

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